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ABSTRACT

Designed to orient and assist teaching assistants (TAs) in the University of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada) Department of History, this handbook features both specific information and guidelines. A general information section describes payroll procedures, and a section devoted to teaching correspondence courses details: (1) procedures; (2) student profiles; (3) evaluation preparation; (4) course assignments' evaluation; (5) grading principles; (6) the purposes of evaluation; (7) assigning grades; (8) a suggested grading scheme; and (9) how to use audiotapes to record tutorials for students. A section entitled "Typical Problems" considers: (1) approaches to teaching history; (2) handling past-due assignments; and (3) alternate approaches to marking incomplete courses. A list of 1985-86 University of Waterloo correspondence courses in history and a TA personal information questionnaire are included. (JHP)

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A HANDBOOK FOR HISTORY TEACHING ASSISTANTS, 1985-1986

by Gord Morrell

Published Jointly by

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The materials in the Special Collection on the Training of Teaching Assistants were developed through the active efforts of numerous educators who first met at the 1986 National Conference on the Institutional Responsibilities and Responses in the Employment and Education of Teaching Assistants held at the Ohio State University. Assisted by more than 80 individuals, the committee chairs listed below were able to establish the collection which will be developed and maintained by the ERIC Clearinghouse for Higher Education. This arrangement will enable faculty members, faculty developers, administrators, TA supervisors, and graduate teaching assistants to have access to TA training materials produced by institutions across the nation.

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I would like to thank several people at this point who helped make this project possible in the first place, and hopefully useful in the end. Professor David Davies (then Graduate Officer in the History Department) and Dr. Chris Knapper (of the Teaching Resource Office) both deserve thanks since it was their informal discussions in the summer of 1985, and the financial support of their respective departments, that made this project possible.

My thanks also go to my fellow conspirators and colleagues. In particular, Linda Ambrose, Rob Ambrose, Susanna Hubbard, Lucille Marr, and Kathy McCracken all endured my interruptions of their own work and provided many useful suggestions and anecdotes based on their own experience, which have found their way into this handbook. My thanks to them and others---Good luck next year!!!

Finally, Professor Keith Eagles, the Correspondence Officer, provided several items concerning procedure and policy which have been included here---this certainly made my job easier and will undoubtedly make life easier for all involved in the coming terms. Many thanks once again!

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Introduction

This handbook was written by a teaching assistant for fellow teaching assistants. It is not a reference text carved in stone, but should be thought of as a starting point for discussions and reflections about the role you will play as a teaching assistant in the Department of History. Hopefully you will find the information presented here relevant and helpful to the challenges of teaching history.

There is a certain amount of detail on departmental policy included here, but most of the material is based upon the experience and reflections of the author and his colleagues over the past few years. There are other ways to approach your duties as a teaching assistant and undoubtedly you will find better ways of handling different aspects of your tasks. You will find your activities as a teacher much easier if you share ideas with each other and offer suggestions and assistance when needed.

Since virtually all teaching assistants (TA) in the Department are involved with the Correspondence Program, this handbook is devoted primarily to the challenges TAs will meet there. The few senior teaching assistants who find themselves teaching in on-campus courses will likely have their own store of experience to draw upon, although some of the remarks made here on marking and grading might be of interest. Other administrative tasks that teaching assistants are sometimes assigned to seemed either too straight forward, or too specialized to warrant inclusion here.

General Information

Studying and Getting Paid!

Full time teaching assistants in the History Department are required to work up to 10 hours a week, for 14 weeks each term, for two terms (i.e two of Fall, Winter, Spring). This total of 280 hours includes any time devoted to keeping office hours, listening to correspondence tapes, preparatory reading, marking, proctoring exams, fulfilling administrative tasks, making tutorial tapes, and so on. Any activity that is devoted to work that you must do to fulfill your teaching duties should be included in your total. In the past most TAs have worked somewhat less than 10 hours per week, but you should be aware that while some weeks may be slack, when assignments and exams come in to be marked you may have to devote 30 or 40 hours of your time to teaching duties.

Although a visit to Irene Majer's office (Irene is the Graduate Secretary in HH 135) will undoubtedly solve most difficulties (most grads learn that beyond being a wonderful person, Irene is absolutely indispensible to the Graduate Program), a few general remarks about getting on the payroll and getting paid can be made here.

Teaching assistants get paid on the last Friday of every month starting in September and in order to be paid they must be sure to go over to room 162 of the Personnel Department (located in the University Business Park at Columbia and Philip), shortly after registration to make sure they get on the September payroll. You should make sure you take your: 1) Canadian Social Insurance # 2) OHIP # or Transfer Form 104 or Pay-Direct Premium notice 3) Current bank, branch, and account number for salary deposit purposes (and a void cheque) 4) Permanent home mailing address.

You should be aware that as a full time TA you will be paid each month during the fall and winter terms only (unless other arrangements are made), and will not be paid during the spring term although you may be working during the spring instead of fall or winter. This has major implications for your budget, so take note!

You can arrange to pay your fees out of your monthly salary for a small service charge, but also note that unless you arrange otherwise, the money deducted for fees will be for the current term only and not for the entire year. Some teaching assistants have run into confusion over such matters (thinking that during the fall and winter the entire years fees were being deducted), only to find themselves having to pay full tuition for a subsequent term when they went to enroll. It can work out very nicely---just keep everything straight!

Finally, if it all gets too confusing, gather a couple of likeminded colleagues and head over to the Grad Club to spend some of your hard earned money on a pitcher of ale!!! I am sure any number of "veterans" will be happy to lead the way.

Teaching Correspondence Courses

At the moment the History Department offers ten to eleven correspondence courses each term (Fall, Winter, Spring) which are made up of 20-22 taped lectures, tutorial tapes, written assignments, course notes and directions. These materials are mailed out with textbooks by the Correspondence Division of the University of Waterloo to each student who registers for a History Department course. Over the last ten years, these correspondence courses have become an integral part of the History Department's undergraduate teaching program so that today one in every three undergraduate students taught by the Department is a correspondence student.

Standard Operating Procedure

At the beginning of each term, teaching assistants are assigned to correspondence courses by the Graduate Officer (Prof. Stan Johannesen) and the Correspondence Officer (Prof. Keith Eagles). Every effort is made to match individuals' interests and capabilities with courses (see attached Teaching Assistants' Questionnaire). At a general orientation meeting at the beginning of each term, the following procedures for marking a correspondence course are explained.

1. The Correspondence Officer makes available at the beginning of each term a set of tapes, notes, assignments in each course (i.e. the same package received by the student enrolled in the course) plus a cassette player. These items are on loan from the Correspondence Division and should not be misplaced! A complete set of textbooks used in correspondence courses has been placed on reserve in the History Department Library (HH 117), although at times individual copies of texts are available.

2. Students send in two or three written assignments per course, each due on one of six pre-scheduled dates. The Correspondence Officer places them in the mail drops of the teaching assistants (located in the History Department Workroom HH 137), the assistants mark the assignments, and return them by mail to the Correspondence Office (c/o Mrs. J Pilavakus) using campus mail envelopes deposited in a mail tray in either HH 115A or HH 135. Every effort must be made to collect, mark, and return assignments in the time allowed (usually one week from the time you receive them). Each teaching assistant receives a Correspondence Office marking schedule at the beginning of the course showing when assignments are due to be picked up and returned, and in addition the History Department encourages you (see section on marking for suggestions) to keep a more detailed record of the progress of each student in the course. This additional record is

particularly helpful where our History Correspondence Major students are involved.

3. The Correspondence Officer takes general charge of setting final exams which are mandatory in all Departmental correspondence courses. However, the marking procedure is the same for final exams as for course assignments except that class lists with exam and assignment marks computed together must be submitted directly to the Correspondence Officer together with the corrected final exams. These class lists showing the course mark for each student are then forwarded by the Correspondence Officer to the Arts Registrar's Office and the Correspondence Office.

The Students

One of the most important aspects of "long distance teaching" is your recognition of the various and often not ideal situations a large number of your students may find themselves studying in. The students in your class will, on the whole, be older than you and may well have a full time job. Some will be parents who listen to their tapes while trying to keep an eye on their children. Other students may have left school many years ago and in the early stages of the course will lack the confidence that on-campus undergraduates who are used to the "system" often exhibit. On occasion students who have taken courses through the correspondence program in History have studied in rather exotic settings. The Department often has students from the northern regions of Canada (one student was at a moose-hunting lodge), some foreign students, and and on occasion, inmates serving time in prison take courses from the History Department. What all this suggests is that your standard view of an undergraduate who is used to performing in the university setting, with its constant load of reading and writing, and endless evaluations, may not apply to a large number in your class.

Another side to this issue is that most of these students are usually keen mature people who are making a special effort to upgrade their education and may well be more motivated than many on-campus students. Do not be surprised if they correct you on details from time to time (a good reason for being careful with your remarks) since some will be avid readers, some will already have university degrees, and some will be teachers themselves. All these factors have implications for you as you try to evaluate, encourage, correct, and respond to the efforts of the students in your class.

Preparation for Marking

Before sitting down to mark your first assignment there are a few things that you should do as preparation. You should, of course, have listened to the tapes in order to familiarize yourself with the course material and also to gain an understanding of the professor's particular approach to the subject matter. You should also have read the course texts or at least have reaquainted yourself with the way that they cover the material (if you have already used the texts yourself you may decide not to read everything assigned) and make special note of the manner that they are to be used in the assignment (they may, for example, be a collection of historical documents to be used as a primary source).

With this background you should now take some time to consider various aspects of the assignment: 1) How does the assignment fit in to the structure of the course---its general purpose. 2) What does it require from the student---writing skills, critical reading of the text. 3) What must be included in any satisfactory response---what approach would be most suitable. You may want to make up a sketch of substantive themes that should be included in a good answer and make mental notes (if not more formal ones) reminding yourself of aspects of writing proper essays, book reviews, or essay question exams (three of the most likely

types of assignments), depending on what the particular task might be. Obviously you will expect less detail and style from an exam essay than from a formal essay or research paper. If you have any questions about the nature or requirements of a particular assignment you should ask the Correspondence Officer (Professor Keith Eagles) or the professor who designed the course.

As you will find out, the professors who have created correspondence courses differ widely in the extent to which they want to be involved with the course once it is assigned to you. Some will want to check your comments and your grading in the early stages, others will leave virtually everything up to you unless serious academic problems occur. It might be wise to clarify this aspect of your duties with the course professor as soon as you have been assigned to your course. Generally speaking however, almost all inquiries should be directed to the Correspondence Officer.

Evaluating Other Students' Work

If you are like most new teaching assistants (or even some "veterans") you may find the task of assigning a grade to another student's work somewhat problematic at first. Most likely a great deal of your initial apprehension will disappear when you read through the submissions of your class and discover that you probably do have some useful comments and observations to make about their work which would help to improve it.

It is generally a good practice to read through the entire set of papers if this is the first time you have marked the assignment (most TAs read a good number to "warm-up" even if they are familiar with the assignment), since it will give you an appreciation of the relative level of understanding your students as a whole exhibit and will also help you to find out from the start what kinds of problems the class had with the assignment. Some teaching assistants, as they read

through the papers initially, start to sort the papers into general categories (ie. good, fair, bad) without making any comments on the papers at this stage.

Probably the first time you mark you may want to delay this until you read them a second time and begin to make your remarks in the margin. If you find you are averaging more than thirty minutes per assignment, you are probably spending too much time, although early on you may find yourself working more slowly. Most assignments should take about twenty minutes and it will be the weaker efforts that take the most time. Your comments should be made in a red pen, or some other contrasting color, and your final grade should appear on the front of the assignment (this helps the Correspondence Division when they go to log the grade).

The following are some of the guidelines arrived at during a workshop for Correspondence Program markers in 1984-85 which will undoubtedly prove useful.

Principles of Good Marking

1) Try to ensure that students are familiar with overall course requirements.

2) Accompany mark with both general and specific comments to explain reasons for your grade and errors you have noted.

3) Ensure comments are clear and comprehensible.

4) Be encouraging and constructive in comments: give credit for good work, not simply blame for poor work.

5) Point to possible improvements (i.e. for future assignments).

6) Identify and communicate common student errors (i.e. by preparing a tutorial tape or tutorial handout).

7) Personalize comments and evaluations.

8) Provide suggestions for further reading (both on course material and on writing and analytic skills).

Purposes of Evaluation

1) To evaluate students' current knowledge.

2) To encourage and motivate potentially good students to improve their performance.

3) To indentify student problems and questions (to be answered in a tutorial comment).

4) To establish contact with students through individualized feedback.

5) To give direction for additional (self-directed) learning tasks by encouraging further private study or correspondence courses.

6) To provide marks for accreditation purposes.

7) To guide, not simply judge student work.

Assigning a Grade

While it may be relatively easy to comment on assignments as you read through correcting spelling, grammar, and factual errors, in the early going (and not only then!) you may find it somewhat difficult to arrive at a final grade for the assignment. Most likely the very good papers and very bad efforts will be obvious enough, but when it comes to distinguishing between a B paper and a B- paper things may not be so easy. Unfortunately there is no easy remedy to this problem and in a sense this is as it should be since marking is, to a small degree at least, subjective, and it is reasonable that what to one capable marker would warrant a B, would to another be a B-. In an effort to provide some initial common basis for evaluating assignment a very general grading scheme arrived at by a U of W Arts faculty committee is offered below.

A Suggested Grading Scheme

A range (80%-100%: A+ 95, A 89, A- 83) Exceptional performance with strong evidence of original thinking, good organization, capacity to analyse and sythesize; a superior grasp of the subject matter with sound critical evaluations; evidence of an extensive knowlege base.

B range (70%-79%: B+ 78, B 75, B- 72) Good performance with evidence of a grasp of the subject matter, some evidence of critical capacity and analytic ability, and reasonable understanding of the relevant issues under examination; evidence of familiarity with the literature.

C range (60%-69%: C+ 68, C 65, C- 62) Intellectually adequate performance of a student who is profiting from his/her university experience; an understanding of the subject matter and an ability to develop solutions to simple problems found in the material.

D range (50%-59%: D+ 58, D 55, D- 52) Minimally acceptable performance; some evidence of familiarity with the subject matter and some evidence that critical and analytic skills have been developed.

F range (0%-49%: F+ 46, F 38, F- 32) Inadequate performance in which there is little evidence of even a superficial understanding (or effort) of the subject matter; in which there is weakness in critical and analytic skills, with limited or irrelevant use of literature.

There are several remarks which should be made here. First, if you are not familiar with the Faculty of Arts Undergraduate program at the University of Waterloo, it would be wise to consult the Correspondence Course booklet or the U of W calendar for more details. If things are unclear there will undoubtedly be

former U of W graduates among your colleagues who can help explain the program.

Another point to consider about the grading of papers is that teaching assistants often fall initially into one of two camps when it comes to finally deciding on a grade. Some teaching assistants apply standards such as are outlined above as they would expect them applied to themselves---in other words they mark undergraduates (usually first year students or non-degree students) according to graduate standards. This leads to extremely low marks and is not, of course, the approach to take.

An opposite and more common misconception of teaching assistants is one which views marks even in the C range as "unacceptable" efforts. Perhaps caused by the fact that graduate students who receive such grades themselves would find them unacceptable, teaching assistants who hold this view tend to inflate marks since they reserve C's and D's for papers that they consider failures. From the descriptions offered above it should be clear that marks in the C range are perfectly acceptable and students with such an average can graduate quite comfortably with a Bachelor of Arts-General degree. A mark in the D range is also a degree credit grade although it would probably not be possible to transfer such credits from the Arts faculty to another faculty within the university, nor would another university accept such a grade as a transfer credit.

A very useful way to get some consistency in marking and also to gain some confidence in your ability to appraise work is to offer to exchange papers when you are marking with other teaching assistants who are also grading. This is particularly helpful if you are sharing the marking load in a course, but even if this is not the case it should be mutually beneficial.

When you get down to making your final comments and grading you may decide to mark in batches of ten papers or so. This will help to avoid getting overly tired at reading the same assignment over and over again, but will also give you a large enough sample to see if it is you that is in a rut of C's or B's and not the students! You should start to get suspicious if you look down at your last dozen grades and find they all are in one particular range. You assessment may be accurate, but it also could be that your own critical skills have dulled since random selection should provide some variance in grades. If the latter is the case---Take a break!!!

Many teaching assistants find it useful over the duration of a course to keep a record of their own comments to the student. The Correspondence Officer has special forms set up for this purpose, but you may find that you can get along with your own set of notes or cards. You will likely want to pay special attention to the particular problems a student is having---this can be useful to remind yourself and the student if it recurs. It is also useful from the Department's point of view since students often take more than one history course and the Department has a file on history majors that you may want to consult (see Correspondence Officer). If you run into problems with a student your record of your comments will again prove useful and if you are curious about how a particular student is doing in other courses you can get the Department Secretary, Gail Heidemann (HH 115A), to do a computer search for their marks. (Such requests should be kept to minimum).

Tutorial Comments and Tapes

In addition to your comments on individual assignments you will want to respond generally to your class about the assignment and offer suggestions on how students might best improve their work. This can be done in two ways. You can make a tutorial tape (the Department can provide you with a good recorder or you can use the Correspondence Division's sound booth) which will be copied by the Correspondence Division and sent out to the students with their graded assignments.

Alternatively, you can type your general comments (the word processing computer is very useful for this) and attach a copy of your comments to each assignment yourself. This method is popular with those TAs who are uncomfortable in front of a microphone. It also has the benefit that the students can keep a written copy for future reference, since they will eventually have to return the tapes.

On your first tape or tutorial comment sheet you should introduce yourself and outline your own interests in studying and teaching history. Make it clear that you are the one marking the assignments, but also point out that you will consult with the professor who created the course if the need arises. You will also want to outline your policy on late papers here so that there will be no confusion later on.

Some TAs also like to include brief remarks about essay writing (probably on the first assignment a significant number of students will have had some problem in this area anyway), and they may even suggest some manuals of style that are readily available in local bookstores (Kate Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Thesis and Dissertations, for example). There is also a learning skills cassette package that the Correspondence Division offers for $15.00 that includes three tapes and two booklets on note-taking, essay writing, and writing book reviews which you might want to suggest.

Beyond this you may want to make some comments about upcoming assignments and suggest how students might best approach them. This is your best chance to deal with problems on a large scale and it probably helps students to know that others are having similar difficulties. In this regard you may want to outline the range of marks on an assignment and point out some of the good points that were made as well as noting problem areas. If you can end your remarks on an encouraging note your comments may well serve as a kind of "pep talk".

Typical "Problems"

What is History? or What History is NOT!

Given the background of most correspondence students it is not surprising that one of the most common problems you will face as someone trying to teach "history" is the strong inclination on the part of these generally practically oriented students to editorialize in their assignments. As with most students who are taking courses in history beyond the high school level for the first time (there are many exceptions to this of course) many in your course will have the widespread misconception that a historian's main occupation is finding the "lessons" of the past and applying them to solve the problems of the future. Thus you will find people drawing lessons from the French Revolution and somewhat imaginatively applying them to the current Canadian political scene. Such remarks will invariably be introduced with "History has taught...", and will include further elaborations on the direct link between the French Revolution (for example) and French-Canadian separatism!

Since historians rarely claim such capabilities for their discipline, and generally pay more attention to the differences changes in time, place and people make to events than they do to common denominators, part of your task will be to gently, but firmly, add some sophistication to the ahistorical simplicity of those students who insist that "History repeats itself". This may be best accomplished (if you find a number of students want to play political pundit in their papers) by including some comments on your first tutorial tape or handout explaining that editorializing in formal essays is out of place, and outlining briefly the type of discipline history is---a very basic "what is history". If a number of teaching assistants find editorializing to be a problem you may want to get together to come up with an effective response.

A closely related misconception that many correspondence students have about History is that it is a discipline that steadily accumulates uncontested knowledge---History is Fact. Most students realize that historians have their own bias, but they tend to see bias as a kind of blatant, and deliberate attempt to misrepresent the Past. They may not understand that the Past can be legitimately and profitably approached from different points of view and that historians choose and arrange their "facts" in a generally honest, though necessarily biased and incomplete fashion.

A common way that this particular problem exhibits itself occurs when students are given a controversial history to write a book review about---for example, a book by a marxist historian. To many students (who diligently run off to read other reviews of the book) the author is simply a misguided academic (if not actually a "stooge" of the Soviet Union), who can make no comments on his subject of any validity and may scarcely be worth reading. You may have to spend some time in your tutorial comments to convince students that marxist historians have made, in certain instances, notable contributions to western scholarship, although it

is true that they, like historians of other persuasions, have interpretive strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond these considerations, which may seem to some in your class as overly academic distinctions, your students will want to know "the answer" or "solution" to the problem (don't we all!!!), and will initially expect to get it from the course lectures, readings, and you. While you may stress in your tutorial comments that some historical explanations are more convincing---one may even be the best!---your students will likely be somewhat disappointed and disconcerted that for most questions of any complexity there are several different, competing theories on "what happened and why". If you suggest that every twenty years or so a new school of revisionist history arises, some may quietly think that writing history is essentially a make-work project, but nevertheless by the end of the course you will have sparked some interest in the many on-going debates that surround most subjects today.

Late Papers

Another problem almost all teaching assistants have is what to do with late papers. Since there is no strict departmental policy you can handle them in a number of different ways. You may want to give a warning about penalties on future late papers in your tutorial comments at the beginning of the course and outline the conditions under which you will accept late papers without penalty. There are all kinds of reasons (job pressures, family illness, and not least of all mail delays) why correspondence students will fail to meet all their deadlines. Use your discretion in individual cases, but make sure that your students know that they should explain by letter or telephone why they have missed a deadline. In the past teaching assistants have been rather generous with extensions---perhaps they can identify all too easily with their own experiences as a student.

Another way to handle the situation is to return the marked assignment somewhat late to the student. This approach has also been used by some T.A.'s in the past in an effort to point out how disruptive tardiness can be on other people's schedules. The penalty inflicted in this case is that your comments will definitely not arrive to the student in time for their next assignment and they will likely make similar errors once again. Since this seems to negate your own teaching efforts to a degree, you may decide on penalties on the grade---if you decide to do so at all. Remember that your students are generally mature people who live in what they call the "real world" so they are used to being kept to deadlines and will usually find your decision justified---particularly if it is outlined to them early on and applied constistently.

Incomplete Courses

In some cases, and despite your best admonitions, correspondence students will complete a course with something missing along the way. In this case there are only two possible marks that may be assigned at the end of the course: F- or Inc. (Incomplete course). The F- is a "holding mark", designed to encourage the student to complete what is missing (it usually works!). The Inc. is a mark that you and the student have agreed upon beforehand which remains in place for three months. The Inc. mark will then (once the work is completed) be removed by a Grade Revision Form signed by you and/or the Correspondence Officer with a xerox copy to the Correspondence Division.

Correspondence Courses/History 1985-86

History 100 (F,W,S)---Landmarks in World History

History 102D (W,S)---From Nationalism to Totalitarianism

History 202X (F,W)---The Individual and the Family in History

History 204X (F,S)---Life on the Ontario Frontier

History 212 (F,S,)---British History Since 1603

History 216 (F)---Irish History: Achievement, Unification, Revolt

History 217 (W)---Irish History in the 19th and 20th Centuries

History 222 (F,W)---History of Modern Revolutions

History 223 (F,S)---Canadian Culture and Society to 1900

History 224 (W)---Canadian Culture and Society in the 20th Century

History 235 (W)---History of Christianity

History 247 (F,S)---Mennonite History: A Survey

History 254X (F,S)---Canadian History: The National Period

History 255X (W,S)---British Empire and Commonwealth History

History 305 (F)---English History 1485-1660: The English Reformation

History 320 (W,S)---The History of Modern Quebec

History 325 (F,W)---History of Canadian Indians to 1870's: From Freedom to Conquest

History 387 (W,S)---Ontario History Since Confederation

Teaching Assistants' Questionnaire

Teaching assistants are asked to fill out the following form and return it to the Correspondence Officer.

Name

Address

Telephone No.

Room in Humanities/PAS

1. Please check the terms in which you can be available for TA duties: Fall (September-December 85)_____; Winter (January-April 86)_____; Spring (May-August 86)_____.

2. Which TWO terms, of the above, do you prefer? Fall____, Winter____, Spring____.

3. Which courses, of those offered by correspondece (see following list of courses), lie within your field of competence? Which could you mark and/or tutor?

4. In what area(s) of administrative duties have you a) experience, b) qualifications, c) competence.

5. Are there special circumstances of health, domestic arrangements, or other, which might complicate your time table of TA duties?